

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 953

FL 018 307

AUTHOR Sanchez-Korrol, Virginia
TITLE Northern Horizons: Latinas in the New Immigration.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 10p.; In: Realizing the Dream. Selected Conference Proceedings; see FL 018 303.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; *English (Second Language); Family Relationship; *Females; *Immigrants; *Latin Americans; *Refugees; Role Perception; Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS *Latinas

ABSTRACT

Many Latin American immigrants have encountered new social problems, including language barriers, stereotypes associated with being hispanic, special insecurities experienced by women, role changes, isolation, and alienation from families. Attitudes about return migration appear to be different in men and women. Men more often wish to return to the society in which their status was clear and simple, while women often feel they have gained status and identity by coming to the United States. (MSE)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED314953

Northern Horizons:
Latinas in the New Immigration

Virginia Sanchez-Korrol
Brooklyn College, CUNY

FD 018 307

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Gantzer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy



Northern Horizons: Latinas in the New Immigration

When 17-year-old Elizabeth Almonte agonized through her first English language presentation at La Guardia Community College, she was repeating rites of passage experienced by countless Latina migrants and immigrants who came to the U.S. before her.

...we are studying here because I don't know how to speak English. And...we are...we come to try. For the future. And we have to study everyday...we have to make a sacrifice for we don't speak Spanish in our home, in the street, at school and don't watch T.V. in Spanish. (*Newsday*, 1987)

The Almonte family, father, mother and three children, immigrated four years ago from a small farming village in the Dominican Republic. Newcomers to the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, the Almontes joined more than 17 million legal Hispanics in the U.S., and an estimated 3 million undocumented aliens; a population which is expected to outnumber black Americans within a generation (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1985).

The very term "Hispanics" is problematic. As a label, it combines colonized natives and their offspring, foreigners and political refugees under one ethnic umbrella. The coherence of this label is questionable on theoretical or historical grounds, caution sociologists who write about ethnicity. For each Latino/Hispano group in the United States, migration experiences must be regarded within an historical framework, reception factors in the new society and the process of the migration itself (Nelson and Tiende, 1985).

Following the Second World War and prior to the enactment of the immigration reforms of 1965, which abolished the national origins system, the largest Spanish-speaking groups to enter the U.S. came from Mexico, the Hispanic Caribbean and Colombia. Instigated primarily by economic instability, political unrest and turmoil, many migrants and immigrants settled in New York City, where

Puerto Rican enclaves, some dating to the turn of the century, offered cultural familiarity and protection (Korrol, 1983). The largest Colombian community was established in Queens. Dominicans settled primarily in upper Manhattan. While population estimates for that period were moderate, these settlements formed the nucleus for post-1960 immigration. As they secured housing and employment, close ties and communication with the homeland encouraged increased immigration and institutionalized a circular migratory pattern.

In spite of the growth of cities like Los Angeles and Miami as entry ports for Latin immigration, traditional sites such as San Antonio, Santa Fe, Chicago and New York continued to receive a sizable share of newcomers after 1965. The decade of the seventies, for example, witnessed an increase of some 70,000 to the New York Puerto Rican population, but increases ranging from 44% to 26% occurred in other cities as well (CALC Report, 1984). Cubans settled predominantly in Florida, but a substantial spillover became evident in New Jersey and New York. The major demographic shift appeared to be the inclusion of immigration from Central and South America. Although the largest source of Latin immigration continued to come from the Hispanic Caribbean, Central and South Americans, particularly from Colombia, radically augmented the city's Spanish-speaking population. According to the 1980 census, the city's Hispanic population peaked at 1.4 million, including 462,000 who were neither Mexican, Puerto Rican or Cuban. These figures, however, did not take into account illegals and refugees, whose numbers are estimated to be anywhere from 400,000 to 750,000 (Reimers, 1986, p. 12).

By 1976 Congress imposed stricter immigration laws relegating Western Hemisphere nations to the same restrictions in effect for the Eastern Hemisphere. This, along with the abolishment of the *bracero* program, a plan designed to provide seasonal labor for southwestern farmers, indirectly instigated the increase in illegal immigration. With regard to this group, immigration historian David Reimers (p. 12) observes:

Perhaps those with the worst experience were the illegals, many of whom were escaping Central American poverty and violent turmoil...many Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans considered themselves as refugees, but the federal government admitted few of them as refugees. For

example, in 1983 and 1984 INS gave asylum to only 1,112 Nicaraguans and 375 Salvadorans...

Undoubtedly, any discussion of the plight of the undocumented must take into account the special problems faced by women. In *Perfiles* (1985), Estela Ramirez, currently residing in Sanctuary in Boston, recalling her experience as a refugee, remarks:

For me, it's very hard to be in a strange country. In my own country, I had my own children and the rest of my family. Here I am very much alone. Here there are many Central Americans, many Salvadorans and Guatemalans...they are refugees and have urgent needs. They have had to come into exile because they are persecuted at home. Here they must go around in hiding out of fear that someone will ask them for their papers. For example, if they are renting an apartment that is really run down or has no heat, they can't say anything to the landlord because the landlord could turn them in to the migra. We're always afraid of being deported, especially if we were arrested or persecuted before. We run the risk of being arrested or assassinated or "disappeared" upon returning to El Salvador.

Given the statistical and demographic profile of a population whose complexities we cannot begin to fathom within the scope of this paper, how do we begin to understand the new immigrant woman? If, as one immigration scholar suggests, new immigration seeks old roots and tends to blend into the old, and the future will resemble the past more than be a departure, we must first separate the faces from the crowds and focus on those issues pivotal to the lives of all new immigrants and old migrants. Certainly, the dismantling of traditional family ties and the restructuring of new ones in a changing environment is a universal experience that affects everyone, but critically impacts on women as wives or heads of households. With thirty to sixty percent of all households headed by women operating below the poverty level, employment, the work experience and access to opportunity emerge as urgent and vital issues (Census Profile, 1984).

In the case of Puerto Rican migrants at mid-century, many women continued to subscribe to their traditional role as homemakers in spite of their rapid incorporation into the job market. The migration process, however, altered their place within the family.

Faced with the economic realities of the period, and the fact that it was frequently easier for women than men to secure employment, Puertorriqueñas left the home for the factories in record numbers. Some, inspired by their new situation, rebelled against the island patterns of male dominance. Ortiz (1983) cites a migrant who summarized this attitude when she said,

Whether I have a husband or not I work. So I do what I want, and if my husband dare complain, I throw him out. That is the difference, in Puerto Rico I would have to stand for anything a man asks me to do because he pays the rent. Here I belong to myself.

While this particular response may have been extreme, others reveal a variety of accommodations to the shifts in male/female and familial roles. Some took in boarders or cared for the children of working mothers. Others did piecework in the home. Most combined demeaning jobs with the equally demanding role of traditional homemaker. Without exception, all paid a price in their efforts to combine traditional values and experience with the new reality.

For the Almontes and thousands of Latinos like them, the process of migration with its familial disruptions and renewals, alienation and accommodations was emotionally debilitating. It coincided with serious unemployment, scarcity of housing and a rising cost of living in New York City. Subjected to a marginalized labor market, many Latinos are frequently employed in industries with seasonal fluctuations, often in declining manufacturing sectors. Prepared to sell their unskilled or semi-skilled labor for survival, they are confronted instead by demands for highly skilled and sophisticated workers in a financial market.

In addition, they find themselves assaulted on a daily basis by an aggressive and intrusive mainland culture. For some, contact with their country of origin, motivated and facilitated by inexpensive commercial air travel, often serves as a buffer. Many subscribe to a sojourner mentality, courageously maintaining their cultural values, submitting remittances to those who stayed behind, saving more money for their own return, and welcoming newcomers into their midst. Others adhere to a growing continental Latino cultural expression that is beginning to both incorporate and transcend national origins. This phenomenon tends to foster a native/Latino cultural experience in place of the hyphenated ethnic-American duality of previous immigrants (Barkan, 1986, p. 30). The comings

and goings, *va y viene*, so characteristic of the earlier Puerto Rican experience, serves to intensify the differences between the new Latinos and dominant U.S. society, while at the same time integrating them into older, better entrenched Spanish-speaking groups.

Despite the fact that Puerto Ricans are not technically included in discussions of new Latino immigration, their unique position within the North American orbit cannot be ignored. The second major Spanish origin group after Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, comprise a larger proportion of the total population than Cubans, Central or South Americans.* Contrary to popular theories about assimilation, the Puerto Rican situation has worsened over the decades, in spite of impressive gains made by the second and third generations.

Throughout the decade of the eighties, census data indicate that unemployment was substantially higher for Hispanics than for non-Hispanics, and the rate for Puerto Ricans remained the highest among the Spanish origin groups. In 1984, the median income of Hispanic families was \$18,800 per year compared with \$27,000 per year for non-Hispanic families. By contrast, Puerto Rican families averaged incomes of \$12,499 compared to \$22,600 for Cuban families.

The plight of Roselia Almonte, so reminiscent of the Puerto Rican experience, is also characteristic of recently arrived Dominicans. Within the past year, she held several jobs in neighborhood factories, which paid minimum wages for complicated piecework. Under federal guidelines, she should have earned \$134 for a forty-hour week. Instead, her first week on the job netted \$76 in cash. Frustrated at the workplace and concerned that she is failing her family, Roselia is also fearful of leaving the security of her neighborhood to search for better opportunities.

In addition, life in the U.S. has brought about an unanticipated alienation within Roselia's family. Husband, son and daughters, each burdened with individual obligations, appear content to travel in his or her own direction. Roselia's work experience in the factories is as unfamiliar to her children as their schooling and academic needs are to her.

Chicana poet Pat Mora (p. 61) poignantly describes this type of family alienation in her poem *Elena*:

*The U.S. Department of Commerce Bureau of Census adheres to the following population breakdown: 10.3 million persons of Mexican origin; 2.6 million persons of Puerto Rican origin; 1.0 million persons of Cuban origin; 1.7 million persons of Central or South American origin; 1.4 million persons of other Spanish origin. These figures do not take undocumented persons into account.

My Spanish isn't enough
 I remember how I'd smile
 listening to my little ones,
 understanding every word they'd say,
 their jokes, their songs, their plots.
 Vamos a pedirle dulces a mama. Vamos.
 But that was in Mexico.
 Now my children go to American high schools.
 They speak English. At night they sit around
 the kitchen table, laugh with one another.
 I stand by the stove and feel dumb, alone.
 I bought a book to learn English.
 My husband frowned, drank more beer.
 My oldest said, "Mama, he doesn't want you
 to be smarter than he is." I'm forty,
 embarrassed at mispronouncing words,
 embarrassed at the laughter of my children,
 the grocer, the mailman. Sometimes I take
 my English book and lock myself in the bathroom,
 say the thick words softly,
 for if I stop trying, I will be deaf
 when my children need my help.

Yet, while life here is hard, for some it is often better than it was
 back home. Employment opportunities are often dramatic. Some
 50% of immigrant women work, and even for those in the blue-
 collar sector, there is satisfaction in significantly increased incomes.
 Ana Cruz Vazquez, divorced mother of six, came to the U.S. in
 1977. She worked in the garment industry, never making more than
 \$130 a week, yet managed to educate four of her children.

I lived on 150 pesos (\$48) a month in Santo Domingo...This
 is Paradise. I am working. I am earning money. I am
 driving. I am buying things I want. My priority is for the
 children. (*Time*, p. 83)

Will many new immigrants follow the well-worn path of return
 migration? David Vidal's series on Latinos which appeared in *The*
New York Times (pp. 11-14) indicates that 90% of the 566 persons
 he interviewed were "most reluctant to wean themselves from the
 past. Among the non-Puerto Ricans interviewed, none mentioned

citizenship as a personal goal. However, the goal for some was " 'la residencia,' the right to permanent residence in this country..."

Elsa Chaney, who researches Colombian immigration, describes their neighborhoods in Queens as "more like a remote province of Colombia than an ethnic barrio of New York City because so many people dream of going home" (Barkan, 1986, p. 16). This aspect of the migration experience denotes a selective adaptation process and a limited involvement in U.S. institutional affairs.

Similarly, the Dominican immigrants fully expect that they will move back to the Republic, especially when they retire. One priest lamented he could not get them to contribute to the church because so many either send money back home "or are saving for their own return."

On the issue of return migration, there appears to be a difference between men and women migrants. While men yearn for the old country, where their status was simply based on their gender and where they were not expected to take part in housework or child care, women prefer to stay. Some point out that while the price is high, the rewards are well worth the efforts. Cuban businesswoman Maria Elena Torano Pantin maintains, "I became my own person. Not my parents' person, not my kids' person and not my husband's person. But mine." In this way, Maria Elena Torano Pantin is also following in the footsteps of countless Latinas who came before her (*Time*, 1985, p. 83).

Clearly, newcomers, new immigrants and old migrants are realizing the dream. But for many the dream is tarnished—an illusion that does not eradicate a harsh reality.

REFERENCES

Adapting to a Different Role. (1985, July 8). *Time*, p. 83.

Barkan, E.R. (1986, May). *Portal of portals: Speaking of the United States "as if it were New York."* Paper prepared for the New York Historical Society Annual Conference, p. 30.

CALC Report. (1984, Oct./Nov.). Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. *TWC Bulletin*, X (6 & 7).

Census Profile: Persons of Spanish Origin in New York City—1980.

See also J. P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican-Americans: The meaning of migration to the mainland*. Prentice-Hall, rev. ed., 1987, chap. 5, for the Puerto Rican experience.

Estela's Story. (1985). *Perfiles*. Tufts University, pp. 137-141.

John H. quoted by B. Siegel, "Immigrants: Sizing up the new wave," *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1982, pp. 1 & 23. See also E. R. Barkan.

Korrol, V.S. (1983). *From colonia to community: The history of Puerto in New York City, 1917-1948*, Greenwood Press.

Mora, P. (1983). Elena. In E. Vigil (Ed.), *Woman of Her Word: Hispanic Women Write* (p. 61). Arte Publico Press.

Nelson, C. & Tienda, M. (1985, Jan.). The structuring of Hispanic ethnicity: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 8 (1).

Newsday, Part II. (1987, Feb.) Series on the immigration of the Almonte family.

Ortiz, A. (1983, Spring). *Puerto Rican Women in the Needlework Industry of New York City*. Paper presented at Brooklyn College.

Reimers, D.M. (1986, May). *Recent third world immigration to New York City, 1945-1986: An overview*. Paper prepared for the New York Historical Society, Annual Conference, p. 12.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Persons of Spanish Origin in the United States: March 1985*. Series P20, No. 403.

Vidal, D. (1980, May 11-14). Hispanic newcomers in city cling to values of homeland. *The New York Times*.